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C O N F I D E N T I A L LA PAZ 000194

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/06/2019  
TAGS: PGOV PREL PINR KDEM SNAR BL  
SUBJECT: LOWER HOUSE PRESIDENT ENLISTS SELF AS BILAT ALLY

Classified By: A/EcoPol Chief Brian Quigley for reasons 1.4 (b)(d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Lower House President Edmundo Novillo told Charge' February 3 that, in order for bilateral relations to move forward, both sides would need to identify common ground and establish some "essential points" for engagement. He added the United States would need to acknowledge the historical U.S. "trauma" President Evo Morales suffers from to improve relations, but that this need not include accepting the "real or imagined" merits of Morales' phobias. A close confidant of both Morales and Foreign Minister David Choquehuanca, Novillo volunteered to facilitate a reengagement. Novillo told us that although the government strongly prefers to keep national elections scheduled for December, it would not rule out closing congress, ruling by decree, and calling for early elections if the "opposition forces this" by blocking legislation required to convoke the elections by the April 7 deadline. Novillo said congress would leave most of the constitutional implementation legislation to its replacement, the Plurinational Legislative Assembly. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Charge' met with Chamber of Deputies (Lower House) President Edmundo Novillo February 3. Charge' and Novillo discussed the series of events that have led to the current precarious state of bilateral affairs. Charge' emphasized the continued U.S. disposition to improve relations, but cautioned that this would be hard work for both sides and, even with good faith and concrete gestures, the relationship would not turn around abruptly.

Morales Identifies with Obama

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¶3. (C) Novillo maintained that Morales has a "real affinity" for President Obama and that his overtures for improving relations "with Obama" were genuine, despite the fact that such overtures were typically mixed in with insults and accusations against the USG. Novillo said Morales considers Obama's "black government" part of a global trend of newly enfranchised populations coming into power, including Morales' own government.

Morales Bilateral Psych 101

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¶ 14. (C) Novillo conceded that President Evo Morales was sending mixed signals about bilateral relations that could confuse the Washington audience, but that this "double discourse" was explainable. Novillo explained that most left-leaning politicians in Latin America were afflicted with an anti-U.S. "trauma" resulting from USG policies and associations with Latin American governments during the 70s and 80s. He said Morales is especially traumatized by his perceptions of perceived unjust and undue USG involvement with prior Bolivian administrations, which are compounded by his personal negative experiences with the DEA as a coca union leader. Novillo said this "trauma" taints Morales' "perceptions of the present" and retards his ability to "move forward."

Dr. Novillo to the Trauma Ward

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¶ 15. (C) Novillo told Charge' he supported a strong U.S.-Bolivian bilateral relationship and offered his services to facilitate a meeting with Foreign Minister David Choquehuanca, a "close friend." Novillo said in order to move forward bilaterally, "we must first deal with the past, which has left many of our leaders in a trauma." Novillo stressed that regardless of whether perceived symptoms of USG transgression in Latin America were real or imagined, the psychological trauma was "very real." In order to overcome this, he suggested any USG diplomatic initiative need not admit to specific wrong doings, but be couched in terms of "turning the page" and be delivered with a healthy public dose of recognition of the "large influence" the USG has played in prior administrations. Novillo implied that such recognition would gain the United States enough good will to overcome historical anti-USG "traumas" with Morales and other leftist Latin American leaders.

Need to Identify Common Ground to Move Forward

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¶ 16. (C) Novillo urged an expedited effort to improve relations, arguing that leaving the relationship at a low point for too long could reset long-term expectations and stymie initiatives to improve relations. Novillo added that moving forward bilaterally required "reflecting together on how we came to this lack of confidence" and "understanding what we need to do to start over." He suggested coming up with a "reconciliation paper" that would outline a short list of "essential points" needed to establish a starting point for a relationship. He stressed such rules of engagement might not result in "a great relationship, but at least the basis of normal relationship," tacitly acknowledging the current state of affairs is not "normal" or desirable.

DEA/USAID on the Table

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¶ 17. (C) Somewhat surprisingly, Novillo opined that "filling the vacuum" left by DEA could be discussed. He did not dismiss the possibility of bringing back DEA agents under the auspices of dual accreditation, TDYs, or as part of a multi-national counternarcotics structure. Novillo did not counter Charge' contention that USAID was and is fully transparent, but discounted the importance of proving USAID's past transparency. He instead emphasized including GOB concerns and participation in future USAID decision making.

The MAS as Reasonable, Opposition as Obstreperous

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¶ 18. (C) Novillo claimed he would attempt to work with "all the powers of the state," including opposition legislators, to implement the new constitution passed January 25. He expressed a clear preference to pass constitutional implementing legislation and modifications of the electoral code needed to convoke new national elections in December via regular and legally-established congressional processes.

However, Novillo also reserved the right to resort to other means should the opposition-controlled senate fail to pass legislation required to convoke December elections before April 7, the deadline established by the constitution. "This will depend greatly on what the opposition does: complement the process, present obstacles, or block the process. I understand that it cannot be easy for congressmen who campaigned for the "no" (on the constitutional referendum) to now take on the inconsistent role of helping to pass implementing legislation."

¶ 9. (C) Novillo claimed that Morales tried to engage the opposition leadership in January, particularly on the issue of autonomies, but that opposition "oligarchs are more concerned with maintaining power" than compromise. Novillo contrasted the Bolivian opposition's temperament about Morales, which "does not even acknowledge that he (Morales) is the president," with the election of U.S. presidents, who are generally accepted by members of both parties.

Novillo: Rule by Decree "Unlikely"

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¶ 10. (C) Novillo explained that the opposition was not monolithically radical and hoped that enough "rational" opposition congressmen would "decide not to be confrontational." As the "nucleus of democracy," he was confident that election legislation should and could be hammered out in congress. Although he doubted Morales would have to resort to closing congress and ruling by decree to initiate early elections, he did not rule it out as an option if the opposition blocks "the necessary (constitutional) process of re-legitimizing institutions" through new elections. Novillo added a process of "reestablishing the state" was "endorsed by the people" with the January 25 referendum vote. "How else will we be able to resolve this impasse?"

Don't Fear the Constitution; Orderly Process to Ensue

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¶ 11. (C) Novillo said most of constitutional implementing issues would be worked out by the newly elected "Plurinational Legislative Assembly," which will replace the old "Congress." Novillo assured that in the interim, "existing institutions and practices" would prevail. For instance, he said ordinary justice would continue to be the law of the land until implementing legislation defined the exact jurisdictions and competencies of communitarian justice, which is given equal standing to the traditional justice system under the new constitution. Likewise, Novillo explained old institutions and norms would continue to function until new institutions could be established or revamped to provide for new myriad constitutional guarantees (health, education, employment, etc.).

Comment

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¶ 12. (C) Novillo appeared thoughtful, frank, and genuine throughout. Novillo will likely share our conversation with Morales, which is probably a positive development. We are hard pressed to think of another member of Morales' inner circle who would convey our concerns more accurately or with less malice. End Comment.

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